



Equality Talks Podcast - Transcript

Episode 2: The value of sabbaticals and maintaining boundaries

Equality Talks. Brought to you by Work 180. Where we discuss how to finally put an end to workplace discrimination. Let's talk about what it really takes to succeed, what people are doing to drive equality and what can still be done.

Samantha S: Today I'm talking to Samantha Reynolds, she has over 20 years working in various engineering and product management leadership roles for startups, as well as global companies such as Microsoft, Amazon, DHL and Honeywell. She's a chocolatier and cancer survivor and she's a single mom of two sons. And I'm really looking forward to talking to her today. We had a brief chat previously when we were just getting to know each other and I really think this is going to be a rich conversation. So thanks so much for joining me, Samantha.

Samantha R: Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Samantha S: I was hoping you could start with telling us a little bit about your career today, because you've been in engineering and product development, which is heavily male dominated for most of your career. And I just was hoping to hear a bit about that experience.

Samantha R: Yeah, I actually started off working in tech when I was in college. I didn't intend to end up in engineering, but my mother was actually in engineering and if you hadn't produced grandchildren, you were free labor on the weekends. So she'd call and she'd be like, "What are you doing this weekend?" "I'm going on a hike with friends. I'm really excited about it." She'd be like, "I have 200 workstations that have to be updated this weekend. You're helping me out." It was kind of that.

Samantha R: And then like a lot of college graduates, you get out and you have student loans and you're looking for the best job you can get, and I had those tech skills to fall back on. So I actually have a business background, business degree. I don't have a computer science degree so I'm completely self taught.

Samantha S: And your mom was an engineer, which surely back then was even more unusual?

Samantha R: My mother went to college... My mother actually was kicked out of high school when she got married, got pregnant and got married and got her GED and she went to college when I went to college. She was actually the one with the computer science degree.

Samantha S: Oh how fascinating. So she was studying at the same time as you?

Samantha R: Yes, and for a long time we competed. So every time we'd get a promotion we'd call one another. We got another technical certification or something like that. Always trying to kind of one another. So it was a very good friendly, loving but very intense competition sometimes. It was great.

Samantha S: Yeah. It's really interesting because people often say you can't be what you can't see. But it sounds like you and your mom developed your skills and career at the same time?

Samantha R: Mm-hmm(affirmative).

Samantha S: And your mum-

Samantha R: Yeah.

Samantha S: Sorry, I was just going to ask a bit more about what that was like. That sort of gentle rivalry with your mum and whether it pushed you to excel more and how you felt about her studying as a mature age student?

Samantha R: One, I think it definitely encouraged both of us. Our careers didn't follow the exact same path. So I remember when I went into networking and I got my Cisco CCNA certification, CCNA. And I told my mom about it and I'm like, "Oh, it wasn't that hard actually. It's common sense stuff." And so she's like, "Really? I heard it was horrible, it was a really hard certification." She went, she took it. She's like, "Oh, that was actually pretty easy."

Samantha R: So it's that kind of stuff. We had experiences that we could play off of. We could talk to each other. We were going through the same type of things. I was working for different companies and she went into banking. She rose up to be VP of banking, CIO for the bank that she worked for and very male dominated. Right? And so I was dealing with the same type of stuff but in very different companies. So it was actually really interesting and inspiring actually to see how far she took it.

Samantha S: It's an amazing story. What encouraged her to go back to study at that stage in her life?

Samantha R: It's just wanting something different. My mother actually, she had children to support. After my parents got divorced, she ended up working on an assembly line and then working at a, first a sports bar at night as a waitress, and then at a hardware store. So she was working two jobs for years. But with just a GED, high school equivalency diploma, she couldn't get a really well-paying job. And she had always been interested in tech. So she'd sit there on the assembly line and she'd get to watch the engineers of the company that she worked at, and she's like, "I could do what they're doing. That's easy." And so all she needed was a degree, the piece of paper.

Samantha S: Yeah. It's interesting, because I did an interview recently with a woman who works at NBN who's one of WORK180's clients and she actually said a really similar thing. So she was a trainee as a field technician and she said, "I wanted a better life. And this was a way to move towards that."

Samantha R: Oh yeah. My mom retired early at a 62 now. I mean, and she couldn't afford to retire. Right? She completely changed her life around.

Samantha S: Yeah. Amazing. What an inspiration for you to see as well.

Samantha R: Exactly.

Samantha S: And so we talked a bit before, so she went into a different male dominated environment, but we talked a bit before about your experience with that and how long it was before you worked with other women. So can you talk a bit about that as well?

Samantha R: You bet. I'd actually been in the workplace and I'd worked for several major companies. I'd worked for Honeywell, I'd worked for DHL, I'd worked for Microsoft. I didn't have my first female manager until I'd spent almost 20 years of my career and that was at Amazon and I haven't had one since.

Samantha S: Oh you haven't had one since?

Samantha R: I've only had the one. So, and I was almost 12 years into my career before I had another female engineer on my team. So just to kind of put it in perspective, a lot of times, even to this day, when I go into a room, I'm often the only woman. And at Microsoft where we really focus on diversity, but it just depends on where you're working and the products that you're working on and the space that you're in. But there are way too few women in engineering. I would say that there's even less now than there were when I first started out. I do know that there's less computer science graduates now than there were when I first started out.

Samantha S: I actually didn't know that. Why do you think that there's a drop in female graduates in those degrees?

Samantha R: In part because there's a tons of really well paying jobs that you can get that aren't STEM and don't have the same kind of harassment and negative stereotypes. Right? Any woman who's interested in gaming online will run into these stereotypes. The constant harassment, the come ons, it gets ridiculous. But you have to deal with. And then when you think about what you deal with when you're in college, for example, I do a lot of mentoring of young women at our local university, and the questions they ask me are not the questions that the young men that I mentor ask me.

Samantha R: So for example, young women will ask me, how to handle the harassment that they deal with at hackathons when guys are trying to really throw them, I'm the only woman on throw at hackathon team, off their game, and it's the constant sexual innuendos. It's the reaching out and pretending like they're going to touch, but not quite. It's just nonstop harassment a lot of times. And so they get that in classes, they get that hackathons and if you get that at the university level, then you're really wondering how much you're going to have to put up within the workforce.

Samantha R: And a lot of them just don't want to have to deal with that. Right? So it kind of depends. We have to create a safe space, a psychologically and physically safe space for these young women when they're students. Right? So that they will get their degree, that they will pursue this as a career path. Obviously once you get into the workforce, right? I mean, I work at Microsoft, and that kind of stuff just does not happen. If you get harassed, you're going to go to your human resources person and it's going to get taken of. Right? But when you're in school, I don't see the same kind of pushback, of protection for students that I actually see in the workplace. And that's kind of ridiculous, and it's sad.

Samantha S: It is, isn't it? Yeah. Because Microsoft's one of WORK180s clients as well, and are doing really good work in progressing the diversity agenda. And one of the ways to do that is you have to support stuff like claims against sexual harassment. But I hadn't ever really put together the fact that at university it's different, isn't it? Because I have a five year old, and I walk into the playground sometimes and I'm like, "Well, it's like Lord of the Flies out there."

I think that that kind of continues all the way through university, doesn't it? That people are kind of older and the Lord of the Flies activities change so that you end up with women being harassed while they but once you're at work, you can't get away with that.

Samantha R: Well, it worked. It's a liability, right? Every company knows that it's a huge liability to have any type of harasser in any way, shape or form. Right? I mean, it not only is toxic to the team, but you have to worry about the impact from a business perspective. Schools, I don't see why they aren't just liable. Right? They should definitely be providing a safe space for students, especially since in a lot of cases this is the first time that a student is away from their parents, right? Is living on their own for the first time, they're figuring stuff out, this should definitely... I mean school should be more safe, you would think than the workplace, and instead it's often the opposite.

Samantha S: And you've talked about the fact that you do quite a lot of mentoring and I'd actually like to dive a bit further into the difference between what men and women look for from a mentoring arrangement. But before we do that, what advice do you give to young women who come to you and asking for this advice about how to avoid sexual harassment at a hackathon or online gaming or whatever?

Samantha R: Online gaming, that goes back to, I hate to say it, but you kind of have to off your skate who you are, right? A lot of times I'm not terribly obvious about who I am, right? Like Samantha is not in my gaming profile, right? Sam might be, and I'm not going to talk a lot, right? Or I'm going to change my voice, or you're only going to play with friends, right? Where it's a safe environment for hackathons and that kind of stuff.

Now I raised two sons. My sons are in their 20s they are great young men and so I use the same kind of advice for them. You'd be surprised at how many bullies are really scared of being confronted, that kind of thing. Especially when guys, they know they're stepping over the line. They know they're being complete assholes to be blunt. And when they're confronted then they back off. But a lot of times girls don't confront, aren't comfortable with confrontation and it just encourages them to keep stepping over the line.

Samantha R: And if they have any allies, like I know my sons have given me examples of where they have stepped in and said, "Knock it off. That's not cool." Right? "You're being an ass." And just kind of stopped it right there. But a lot of times girls have to do the same thing, they have to push back. And I remember one, I was doing a group mentoring session and one of the women in the session answered for me and she's like, "I've got four brothers, I don't have to deal with any of that kind of stuff at the hackathon." And she goes, "Because I give it right back to them." Right. "I can harass just as much back."

Samantha R: And so it's just kind of you don't want it to have to be like that. Right? You don't want to have the impact to have to be that they have to confront, that they have to get in somebody's face, that

they have to trash talk back. But unfortunately without university oversight, without them stepping forward more, a lot of times is that, the main recourse that they have.

Samantha S: Right. So to kind of offer up a little bit of hope to someone who might be listening and thinking about a career in STEM, what's it like in the workplace? What do you find happens there?

Samantha R: It's very supportive. I mean it's very different. I've worked for some major companies and I've worked at a startup as well. I hate to say that there's no excuse for bad behavior, right? I really think there's no excuse for bad behavior. But a lot of times if I can get them to understand that the behavior that they're dealing with in uni is very different than what they're going to deal with in the workforce, it's going to be night and day. You're going to have a ton of people supporting you.

Samantha R: You're going to have a lot of men in the workplace. They've got kids, they've got daughters. If they see something out of line, they will step in before you even have to say a word. Right? So it's a very different environment, at least in my experience and for the young women, our new college grads that I mentor here and they tell me about some of the things they go through and I'm instantaneously like, "Well, how's it been so far here? Is there anything I need to help you with? If you run it in there?" Nope. Completely. Night and day experience.

Samantha R: And two at uni, there are resources that you can reach out to, get mentoring, get your friends to help, allies, that kind of stuff. And there's plenty of places that I've heard of that a lot of girls actually had and women have had pretty positive experiences at uni as well. Right. You were just kind of talking about some of the, lead me down with kind of the path of some of the negative experiences, but there've been some great positive experiences as well. A women team winning hackathons or being fully accepted as part of their classwork. I mean things I think of have changed in the last couple of years as well with me too and people being more open about what they're experiencing.

Samantha S: Yeah, yeah. Me too is making really positive waves across so many different areas and industries. And actually I didn't complete an engineering degree, but I did do two years of mechanical engineering before I swapped to a commerce degree. And in Engineering there would be lectures of 200 people and there would be six women in there, and I actually had a great experience as well. Like I didn't experience any kind of harassment or negativity. And so I think, it's important to remember that although there are of course these stories of things happening and you need to know what to do if something does happen and what kind of avenues you can take for recourse, it doesn't always happen and you can have a great university experience.

Samantha R: No, not at all. In my experience I would say 99.9% of the guys I work with, and have worked with throughout my career are spectacular. Right? I mean they're geeks. Not always the most social, they are usually introverts. They will talk Marvel versus DC, they will talk to you and cling on. Seriously and once they get used to you, I have lost track over the years of how many guys have come up to me for advice. Like, "Okay, so my wife gave me this list of what she might want for a birthday and I got something off this list and now I'm in trouble. What did I do wrong?" And I'm like, "What did you get her off the list?" "I got her the vacuum. It was the most expensive thing."

Samantha R: "Okay. So what else was on the list?" "Well, she had a day at the spa and she had some a Safari gift card." And I'm like, "And you got her the most practical thing." "But it was the most expensive." And they don't get quite why their wife was disappointed or upset. So being engineers,

they're like, "I don't understand what I did wrong. I need to understand it." And they come to the only woman on the team going, "Can you help me? I'm in trouble. It's nothing to do with engineering, has everything to do with, where did I goof up because I don't get it. I thought I was doing good." So sometimes being the only woman on the team, you get some questions where you're like, "Okay let me walk you through some things."

Samantha S: And you know what's interesting too is like I've done a lot of interviews with women who work in STEM. So I also write this stuff profiles which go up on our blog, which is just women's stories of their careers and tips and advice and stuff. And the number of women who work in engineering roles and in... Well, so I suppose in engineering I mean both sides, like data engineering and computer engineering and then also in like field technicians that kind of physical engineering side, and the number of women who've said if you ask questions and are interested that so people are so helpful, and I've had really positive experiences with mentorship through their early careers, just by being interested and asking questions and being passionate about what they're doing.

Samantha R: Exactly. And what I've also seen is that a lot of times I'll have guys who'd work in my team and they'll come in, there is a lot of trash talking sometimes in engineering, right? Between the guys, and they know that I'm not going to trash talk them. I'm not going to give them crap for not knowing something because I go to them when I don't know anything. Right? And I do go to them on personal things sometimes as well. As a single parent with two boys, I remember when my kids were preteen and teen, I'd go into him and say, "All right, is it normal for two guys to deck each other?"

Samantha R: Because my son and his best friend got into a fight and it was like, five minutes punching each other kind of thing. I'm flipping out and then they're completely okay. Whereas, is this normal? Because if two girls get into a fight and punches are thrown or something, it's over. You're not going to talk to each other for months. These guys were like sharing a pizza 10 minutes later. Is this normal? And the guys say, "it's totally normal."

Samantha S: It's totally normal.

Samantha R: Yeah, and as a mom you're just trying to figure out what's normal, what should I be concerned with because physical violent, not my thing. I do not understand this. But the guys would just be laughing at, "Oh yeah, you have nothing to worry about. Totally normal." Like, "All right, just checking."

Samantha S: I see little boys playing in the playground, like 10 year olds or whatever and I want to intervene and then we'll realize that actually everybody's laughing and having a good time.

Samantha R: Or if they're not laughing right then, by the time you get to them and you start pulling them apart, they're like, "What's your problem?"

Samantha S: Yeah, "What's wrong?" Yeah.

Samantha R: You're like, "Your nose is bleeding. You have hurt each other." But yeah. So it works both ways. But I'd have guys come to me on engineering problems because I wouldn't, I just want to help them solve it. I'm not trying to do the one-upmanship or any of that kind of stuff. And so I was kind

of a Safe Haven as well. So it's interesting, but I do completely agree. If you show passion, if you're really interested, oh my God, they love to show you stuff. And it's mansplaining, but in the best possible way.

Samantha S: And I want to ask you more about mentoring. So you do quite a lot of mentoring and I want to find out why you do it? What people can get out of being a mentor? And what people can get out of having a mentor? And if you're looking for a mentor, what's the best way to go about making that happen?

Samantha R: You bet. I mentor because I, I'll be honest, it's almost selfish in a way. I get so much more out of it than I would ever say that I give back. Right? I had a lot of people help me throughout my career and I'm at that stage in my life where I want to make sure that I'm giving back. Right? And so that feeling of giving back, but also just finding out what people are experiencing, what I can help with, right? I'm in a leadership role, being able to help people is fantastic. And it's very different from politics. It's different from what I do the other 95, 90% of my job, right? I'm trying to get different orgs to line up and agree to something.

Samantha R: So you can have a real impact with somebody, you can definitely help them take the next step in their career or solve a problem that they're having, or help them roleplay through a difficult conversation, so they're prepared for it, direct them to the right resources. There's all kinds of things. So I would say that the feeling of gratification and the sense that you really are helping somebody is what I get back from it. And I would encourage anybody to do it. Trust me, if you get into mentoring, you will get so much back, more back from it than you would think that you would ever put in, right? No matter how much time you spend on it.

Samantha R: In regards to how people can get a mentor, I would say that my recommendation is to reach out, but be specific. So when I have reached out for mentorships and ones that have been the most successful for me are where I reached out with a specific ask to either learn or understand something or to get an introduction to somebody. So if you just say, "Hey, I want a mentor." And you reached out to me and I'm like, "Okay, well what can I help you with?" Right? I want to make sure that I'm the best person to help you with something, depending on what it is that you're looking for. I don't want it to be generic. I want you to have an idea of what you're looking for so I can concretely help you.

Samantha R: And I found that when I reach out for mentorships, it's the same thing. If I say, "Hey, I'm really trying to understand this technology more or I want to understand how this business operates or I am trying to find somebody who understands the product life cycle of X, Y, Z, so that I can make sure that we're not interfering with one another with this product that I'm coming up with." You ask for something specific, people are much more likely to respond. If you asked for something very generic, they're not going to be sure how they can help you. And people are really busy right now, in general, and they're probably not as likely to respond.

Samantha R: So I would just say be very specific and be prepared for priorities versus current focus discussion. Like if you come to me, I'm going to ask you what your priorities are, and then I'm going to ask you what you spend most of the time working on. And most often what I see is that priorities are not aligned with somebody's current focus areas. And to me that's always a big concern. So we'll talk through that as well. But beyond that, be specific.

Samantha S: So what are some of the questions people have come to you with? Because, if you're trying to figure out what you might ask, it can be hard to know how specific today, what a good questions that people have asked you that have led to like a really juicy mentoring conversation or engagement?

Samantha R: A lot of the ones I've gotten recently are from engineers wanting to move into product management or from product managers wanting to move into technical careers. And so those have been some really juicy, "Hey, I'd done A, B and C and I want to take my career to here. This is what I was planning on doing, can you review my plan to how to get there? Or can you give me any advice or feedback? If you were to look at my LinkedIn profile, am I setting myself up for the interviews I'm trying to get?"

Samantha R: I get a lot of questions on blockchain as well. And so they'll be like, "Hey, I'm wanting to get into blockchain. I'm a data scientist. Could you just give me 15 minutes or 30 minutes on the differences you see from a data perspective from blockchain versus traditional databases? I want to make sure that I'm reviewing the right things, that I'm asking the right questions or studying the right material." So they're coming with pretty specific asks for the most part. If they aren't, a lot of times I will hold an intro session, a 30 minute kind of introductory session, and then try to find out if there's something that specifically I can help them with. Because it's like a first date thing. It takes a lot of guts to reach out to somebody and ask to be mentored.

Samantha R: And so I encourage everybody to make that first reach out, but to have some specific questions in mind about how you think that one person can help you. Even if it's just to review something that you're looking at, just to get their feedback. "Feedback on my resume, feedback on my LinkedIn profile, here's where I want to go. What gaps do you see that I need to close, before you would consider me or somebody in your role would consider me for a position?" Those are always fair questions to ask.

Samantha S: And how long do you normally expect a mentoring relationship to run for? Like is it sometimes it's just one conversation and then that's kind of it, and sometimes it goes on for a while? Or how do you normally manage them? And how do you manage your time if you have a lot of people asking you these kinds of questions?

Samantha R: I set aside a couple of hours a week for mentoring. Sometimes it goes above that, but it's also are people willing to meet after work hours? If they're willing to meet after work hours and I'll put a little bit more time into it. Right? If it's during work hours, then I have to move around meetings, that kind of stuff. But usually mentoring relationships, depending on what they're asking for will run at least, I'd say two to four sessions, depending on what they're looking for. Sometimes they're longer. I've got mentoring relationships that I've had with people years where we meet once a quarter, once every four to five months just to check in. They'll give me updates, ask for feedback on some things. In those cases they don't have, they don't send me an agenda beforehand, they just make sure it's booked with me and we go forward.

Samantha R: So it really depends on the role and how it plays out. It particularly as they progress, they do become very much two way mentoring sessions. So if I know somebody, for example, has an expertise in payment systems, right? And they had wanted to go from an engineering role into product management, and they did and they are now a product management on payment systems. And I have a question on something, that I may reach out to them and say, "Hey, can I get 15 minutes of your time? I

have a question that's specific to blockchain and payment systems. I just want to run some use cases partially. You don't have to know about blockchain, I got that down. But I would like some feedback on some payment services use cases that I have, do you mind sitting down me on?" Right? So it works both ways. Definitely.

Samantha S: Yeah. Okay. One of the things you talked about earlier is, if women are having, experiencing some, any kind of harassment or whatever. Part of dealing with it is to be clear about their boundaries and push back on it. And when we talked previously, you told me about a great rule that you had as a manager. So can you tell us what that rule is and what that looked like when you were enforcing it?

Samantha R: Yes. My first major job outside of college was working for a construction company and I led their IT team. And I had a rule, and this is particularly relevant when it's, since I worked for a major construction firm, that they couldn't swear at me in my office. So construction workers do swear a bit more than I think almost any other industry out there. They're used to swearing out in the field. So when they came into my office, that was the boundary. I was not going to be sworn at by the guys that I worked with, particularly in my office. If they caught me in my hallway, in the hallway, in the cafeteria, in the parking lot, it was frigging, but in my office, they weren't allowed to swear.

Samantha R: And so sometimes they'd come in, they'd be really frustrated and they'd be like, "God, that server... My networks..." You could just tell they were so frustrated, they'd a hard time for me to complete sentence without swear words being involved. And so if they're really frustrated and they were being decent and about it, I'd step out in the hallway so they could finish their sentences. But I did keep the boundary of my office being a swear free zone, a respectful zone. Right? You can't come into my office, starts swearing, you have to be respectful. But yeah, it was kind of funny actually sometimes. And if they did swear at me in my office and they broke the rule, well, your ticket could take 24 hours for me to take a look at.

Samantha S: Yeah, this is passive aggressive. Well, I'm a bit busy.

Samantha R: Well, I mean it's not just me, it was my entire team. Right? So yeah, don't treat my team bad there, I can delay your ticket indefinitely.

Samantha S: Well, one of the things I liked about that story is that if someone came into your room and they were really upset, and you could tell that they were so angry, they couldn't even get the message across without being allowed to vent a bit, that you would let them step out of the office. And the reason why I thought that's so clever is because it maintains the boundary. There's no swearing in your office. You're not saying, "No swearing ever in my presence." You're saying, "My office is a space where you're not allowed to do that."

Samantha S: And instead of saying, "It's okay, if you're upset, you can swear in this instance." You say, "No, the boundary is my room. And so you can step out of the room to get to do it." And I think that that's an important distinction because it really retains your boundary that you cannot swear in the room. Because once you let that kind of thing slide a couple of times, then it becomes much more difficult to enforce it.

Samantha R: Yes. And it was really funny because I would have guys who would stick their head in my office, my doorway and be like, "Are you going for coffee? Can I buy you coffee?" I'm like, "I'm going to take a coffee break in like 15 minutes." "Could you take a coffee break now? Or I'll come back in 15 minutes." Then it's like, "All right."

Samantha R: But again, a bunch of fantastic guys, right? I mean you hear these stereotypes about construction workers. That wasn't my experience. They were a fantastic bunch of people to work with. It's just certain norms and I did learn some very, very creative swearing while I worked, in the six years that I worked for that company.

Samantha S: I wanted to talk a bit now about your kind of alternative paths that you've taken, because you actually spent six months as a chocolatier, and so I wanted to find out more about that. How that came about, what it was like and why you decided to return to engineering after it?

Samantha R: Well at the time, a couple of years before I had gone through culinary institute, and become a certified chocolatier. And it was just something that was nontechnical, had nothing to do with computers all day, working with your hands, being creative, and I'm completely addicted to chocolate. So being able to eat your output and it's good. I mean, that's always a bonus as opposed to code. So in 2014 I took a sabbatical. I actually wanted to see, I'm like, "Hey, my kids are going to be going off to college here shortly." And I was really burned out on tech. Too many weeks of massive over time for months on end, that kind of stuff.

Samantha R: And so I went and I actually resigned from Microsoft at the time. They offered me a leave of absence, but I know myself, I'd be constantly checking my email, on my phone or whatever, just to see what was happening while I was supposed to be on sabbatical. Now that wasn't going to work. So I actually resigned the company. I did a digital detox, which was really hard for me. You don't realize how much you miss that adrenaline rush from email and the constant being on and all of that kind of stuff. You don't realize how damaging that is until you shut it off. I went bankrupt, I did an email bankruptcy, right? Where I deleted everything out of my email and figured if ever anybody wanted to reach out to me, then they would text me if it were really important.

Samantha R: And I went to work for a chocolate company as a free intern. Helped them with everything from their marketing plans to upgrading their servers and to anything else that I could. I wanted to see what it was like to run a chocolate company and if that would be something that I would really want to do as the next step of my career. And I discovered that, "No, I love chocolate." Don't get me wrong. I travel for chocolate. I have a trip planned every, well right now, lately it's been every month, where I go someplace and I go for chocolate. I may hit 30 places in one weekend. I just spent time in San Francisco. I am in Portland next weekend, I'm back in town then I'm in... God, where am I? I'm in New York city in October. I'm in North Carolina in November and I'm in Austin in December.

Samantha R: I know I'm going to Paris the end of October, and these are all chocolate related trips. Friends, family, but also chocolate related trips. And so I discovered that I love sharing chocolate with people. I loved minding new chocolate. I love the business elements of it, but I would probably not want to do it full time. I think that would take some of the joy away from me. And during that whole digital detox, the email, bankruptcy, all of that kind of stuff where I set rules. I mean nothing went into my inbox because I deleted it immediately. I fell back in love with tech, right? Being away from it, then I started jonesing for it and I started remembering what I enjoyed so much about it.

Samantha R: And so yeah, I could have gone into other fields. I could've gone into some other things, but I actually chose and I went back into tech. I went to the Amazon actually next after my six months sabbatical.

Samantha S: I like that you actually chose to go back to the same thing because it's a really conscious choice, we find ourselves 10 years into a career and look around. And I actually had a conversation with a woman just recently, sort of 15 years integrated really senior in a tech company. And her view was actually, "I don't know if I'd do it again like this." But you got the chance to stop, assess and then really consciously decide to go back into it, which I think is quiet. It sets you on a really satisfying cough, I think.

Samantha R: And I actually recommend to people that they take a self funded sabbatical. I had taken one as well 10 years before. I had quit my job. I'd actually moved up from Phoenix, Arizona where I was living to Seattle, and I took a six month sabbatical. And again, I was burned out when I left and when I accepted another role, it wasn't even what I interviewed for, one that that people reached out and offered to me and at that point I had fallen back in love with tech. I'd been away from it long enough to remember what I enjoyed about it. I'd done some fun, fun projects on my sabbatical that were just for me. Right? Some actually for my mom. I'd done some research from my mom.

Samantha R: And yeah, you just have to step away from something to remember what you like about it, what you love about it and then make a really conscious choice when you go back to make sure that the next role you go back to has that stuff that you loved, right? Has those elements that you really enjoyed about your career, and sometimes we get so stuck in the day to day or the next role that you have or the next place that you're reorged into where the next thing that you're asked to solve, that you forget what you love to do and you forget to pursue it. And so by stepping away from it consciously, save up for it, but consciously do it, then it makes it much easier for you to decide on next steps.

Samantha S: I can hear people thinking all the resistance that people have towards taking a sabbatical. "I can't afford it. What if my career stalls, my job won't be there when I get back et cetera, et cetera." So when you are suggesting to people, when you recommend that they take a sabbatical, what do you say to all those responses that people have that are all the reasons why they can't do something like that?

Samantha R: Well, I think you should always have emergency savings, right? So you definitely fund it and you're smart about it. But I would say that in my experience, those are not necessarily valid concerns. So I have never really had a problem finding a job. When I went to Amazon, that was still during the recession and I still landed a job within, I don't know, eight weeks, right? If you're good at what you do, if you work hard at being good at what you do, right? You're going to have employment opportunities.

Samantha R: And when I, both times I left, I did my sabbatical I've only had the two experiences. I'm only down two sabbaticals because I only do them every 10 years. When I came back, I took a role that was at a higher level than the one that I left. So I would argue that passion plays a huge role in it. And you may not realize that you're holding yourself back because you're so burnt out where you're not enjoying what you're doing, and that's going to show in your work in your career. So stepping away, finding out what you... remembering what you love about your career or finding something new that you love, passion plays a huge part in your success.

Samantha R: So going back into the workforce after sabbatical and being really passionate about what I was going after, I think that there's a reason that I came back at a higher level, every time I left. I came back energized, passionate about it, ready to go, eager. And it was reflected in the offers I received.

Samantha S: I was thinking, more and more companies are understanding the value of diversity, of thinking within the organization. And so the employee who's been in the same company for 20 years, it hardly exists anymore. And I think you're right you may come back energized and full of excitement and passion for what you're about to start, and like really ready to be working again. And I think that that is reflected in the way that you show up for job interviews and all that kind of stuff.

Samantha S: And you have a really interesting story to tell about why you were away. In fact, it's making me think sometimes people find themselves in a period of unemployment unintentionally, but if you can take action and reframe that as a sabbatical, I bet it has a different impact during your job searching

Samantha R: You bet. I mean, you'd be surprised when I was interviewing right after. People are like, "You took a sabbatical for what?" I'm like, "To be a chocolatier." "Oh my God, that is so cool." It was not a detriment for that on my career. And I could tell them where I worked and all this stuff that I'd done and it was kind of a selling point almost. But I mean that could be anything. Did you travel? Right? Did you write a book? What did you do? Did you hike the Appalachian trail? It's just you have something and you're energized and you come, back and the place that you're coming back to does not have to pay for your extended holiday. You're not going to ask for time off.

Samantha S: Yeah, that's interesting.

Samantha R: You just kind of got it out of your system. Yeah.

Samantha S: And I think in today's employment market, getting cut through in some ways an important thing to be able to stand out from the crowd because there are often many, many applicants for any open position. And stuff like that really does make... they remember you, right? You want to be remembered and they'll remember the chocolatier in the job interview.

Samantha R: Exactly. Exactly. And then you can talk about resilience, you can talk about failure profiles, you can talk about taking risks, right? I'm in product management now, half product management, half engineering. And when people say, "Are you comfortable taking risks?" I'm like, "Yeah, let me give you some examples." I can talk about business specific ones, but I can also talk about personal risks, right? What I learned from them and whether they worked or didn't work.

Samantha S: Yeah. Yeah. Interesting.

Samantha R: Resiliency is important.

Samantha S: I want to go back to the digital detox, because the idea of just selecting every message in my inbox and pressing delete, kind of terrifies me. So what did your digital detox look like when you had your sabbatical? And is it something you brought back into your day to day life? Do you have sort of digital detox practices now? Take it away from there.

Samantha R: I actually do have some. It gets kind of interesting. So my digital detox was, I actually did delete everything in my inbox and I'll be honest, I had a ton of stuff in there, notes to myself cause I do email myself reminders to do things and I'm like, "If it's important I'll remember to do it." Right? "Or it'll come back to me and I'll write it down on my new to do list." But I'm overwhelmed by the idea of going through 4,000 messages from the last few years that have just kind of reminders to myself on things and all of that. I haven't forgotten any of the important stuff. My kids are fed, sheltered, getting ready for college. Good. Bills are paid on time. So, yeah.

Samantha R: So I deleted everything and I set up a rule that I would file certain things from family members, all of that. But I sent out a message, I had a message that said, "If it's really important, text me. If you don't know how to text me, you're not that important to me."

Samantha S: Oh yeah. "If you don't have my number, you don't get unlimited access."

Samantha R: Pretty much. So some people thought it was funny and they're like, "Seriously?" I'm like, "I'm not checking email anymore." Because I kept reaching out to my phone, and it was a subconscious thing. I pick up my phone, I click to check my email before I remembered, "I don't have to go into work. I don't have meetings. Why am I checking my email?" Every 45 minutes, nobody is going to be emailing me that anything, that's it. That is that important. So I used to have a really bad habit of checking my email when I first woke up in the morning before I even got out of bed just to see what kind of issues I would be dealing with from other regions.

Samantha R: So breaking myself at that habit as well. And it was really hard. You don't realize that you're in adrenal failure until you're sleeping so much. Right? So I'd slept a lot longer than I would've thought I would the first several weeks. I was just kind of in a low level, I don't know, depression, just exhaustion mode. It all finally caught up with me and I had to work through that, and actually having to get up and go to work at the chocolate, it was actually great, and getting me through that. But I do do some things now as well. I am very big on prioritizing.

Samantha R: So there's a couple of different models. One that I use is just the nine pyramid. So your top priority, and there's three rows, your top priority. That's the one thing that you should be looking at and going, "I might have do that today." And then there's four, there's three below it and those are your next three priorities. And then there's five below which are just lower level, because really how many priorities can you have for any given year? Or any given day? Right? And so it usually, most stuff that I focus on during the day will be priorities one through four, and then the five through nine I'll be like, "Yeah, if I get to it, I have spare time. Great."

Samantha R: It's kind of like Warren Buffett's 5/25 rule. He tells you to write down the 25 priorities that you have and then only work on the top five, and you don't even touch the other 20 if you really want to be successful. And so by focusing on my priorities and if I have to, if I'm looking and I'm feeling overwhelmed to look at my priorities and then I'll look at my list and go, "Here's all the things that aren't priorities, I can just slice through them right now. I'm not going to focus on them. I'm not going to do.

Samantha S: I think it can be helpful to get them all Ash of your head so you're not spending energy trying to remember what they all are. But I always say having 10 priorities is the same as having none, because you can't do 10 priorities at the same time. So yeah. So I want to finish up by asking you for

your top sort of tip or piece of advice or invitation, and for someone who's listening about career or career in STEM or taking sabbaticals or mentoring or anything that we've talked about today?

Samantha R: I would say top advice really goes back to taking care of yourself, realizing that you can't take care of other people unless you take care of yourself. So I'm a firm believer in naps.

Samantha S: I love naps.

Samantha R: Naps are so underrated when you become an adult and my kids have got it down. Toddlers, man. Yeah, they've been in love with my kids were toddlers and I had an excuse to nap with them.

Samantha S: Totally. Unless I lie down too.

Samantha R: Two hours? Oh. I had to take a nap. My kid wouldn't sleep unless I was there. But no taking care of yourself, feeling comfortable saying no and not having to justify it. Right? "Hey, I don't have to tell you why you're not the highest priority for me. I know what my priorities are and so I'm comfortable saying no." Right? I think that would be the top thing. I have a whole bunch of working mother hacks that I developed over the years that strangely enough I spend a lot of time mentoring moms on. But beyond that I think from a career perspective or kind of a work life perspective, yeah, take care of yourself and feel comfortable saying no, and don't justify it.

Samantha S: What are some of your working mom hacks?

Samantha R: Oh, well for example, when my kids were young and when they were toddlers, we lived in Arizona, and so in Arizona it's hot, right? Most of the year. And so I would actually give my kids a bath and I would put them to bed and their little tank top and shorts that they would wear to daycare the next day. So in the morning I didn't have to mess with them to get dressed or any of that kind of stuff. They were already in their tank top and shorts.

Samantha S: I've had other people talking about that too. I think it's a great idea.

Samantha R: Yeah, it's just kind of, if they're going to wear those clothes anyway and they're going to get trashed at preschool. So who cares if they're a little bit wrinkly because they slept in them, whatever. Let's see, when my kids were teenagers, they got a car and everybody gave me crap, "You bought your kids a car?" And I'm like, "Well I bought my kids a car so they could make my life easier." So my kids got a car and I paid for gas and I paid for insurance and they had to do all of my errands to make my life easier. I stopped doing grocery shopping when my son's got a car, so that not only taught them the price of groceries and how to shop for sales and all that kind of stuff, but I mean it has saved me so much time.

Samantha R: I needed mulch, send the kids to home Depot. I need dog food, they go pick up dog food. I want a milkshake at 9:30 at night because I've got a whole round of conference calls or dinner, my kids are going to go to a fast food place and get me a chocolate milkshake and bring it back. So it saved me a ton of time and they basically got the use of the car to, of course every teenage boy wants a car, but I made it easy on myself as well. I paid them to learn how to cook. They made dinners, I didn't

have to cook. They learned how to cook. It worked. They also went to the grocery shopping for those dinners, all kinds of things.

Samantha R: Oh I had a fully stocked fridge and multiple X boxes in my house when my kids were preteens and teenagers because there's early release day in high school. So they get out of school early on Wednesdays and everybody would come to our house because we had the three X boxes and all the latest games and a fully stocked fridge. And I really just wanted to make sure I knew all of my son's friends so that when they asked them to do something stupid, my sons could respond. "Yeah, no man, my mom would kill me, and then she'd come find you." Then I want their friends to be able to say, "Oh yeah, your mom. Right? Shit. Yeah, no, no problem."

Samantha R: So little things like that when your teenagers or whatever. I've got a whole slew of them of different things that I discovered over the years that worked. But yeah, my kids can cook. They know how to shop, they do their own laundry. They're really responsible young men. I raised men, not boys. And I didn't have to go grocery shopping for about four and a half years there.

Samantha S: Yeah. That is the main thing.

Samantha R: Didn't have to cook six out of seven dinners a night, a week, and didn't have to do grocery shopping, or buy mulch or dog food.

Samantha S: Thank you so much for your time. This has been such an interesting conversation and I feel like we covered a real breadth of topics during this chat.

Samantha R: My pleasure. My pleasure. It was great talking to you.

Samantha S: I really hope you enjoyed today's chat. If you can help us spread the word by giving us a review on iTunes, that helps even more people find equality talks. To find out more about our mission, check out current opportunities with WORK180's endorsed employers and to read and to more inspiring stories.

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